

SURRENDER? NUTS!

Story by Renita Foster

It was perhaps the most famous four-letter-word reply in World War II history, one that left a phenomenal legacy that's lasted over half a century. And if the Belgian town of Bastogne has its way, BG Anthony McAuliffe's response to German surrender demands during the Battle of the Bulge — "Nuts" — will be remembered forever.

"I thought McAuliffe would just laugh and come up with something

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more formal," said retired LTG Harry Kinnard, as members of the 101st Airborne Division prepared to return to Normandy for the 55th anniversary of D-Day and the Battle of the Bulge in 1999. Kinnard missed that reunion because of medical problems.

Kinnard was a lieutenant colonel and division operations officer and McAuliffe was temporarily in command of the 101st when it held Bastogne but was surrounded by the advancing German army during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944.

McAuliffe's response to the surrender demand inspired his troops to a heroic stand that helped stop

Germany's last major counteroffensive of the war in Europe.

"When McAuliffe heard the demand," Kinnard said, "he laughed and said: 'Us surrender? Aw, nuts!' But when he realized he had to respond, he told the staff, 'I don't know what to tell them.' He asked what we thought, and I said, 'That first remark of yours would be hard to beat.'"

The rest of the staff wholeheartedly agreed with Kinnard, and McAuliffe immediately wrote, "To the German commander: Nuts."

"We had absolutely no idea sending back 'Nuts' would have the kind of impact it did," Kinnard said. "But I'm not that surprised, because 'nuts' is a typical American word, and it was exactly how we felt about surrendering. It was also a huge morale boost for the public back in the States hearing about our desperate situation of being surrounded at Bastogne."

Cleo Zizos, of the Fort Monmouth, N.J., Public Affairs Office, remembers



BG Anthony McAuliffe and LTC Harry W.O. Kinnard display a road sign identifying their headquarters during the battle.

sitting around the radio with her family, listening for details of the war during the Christmas season of 1944. When they heard of the famous reply, there was only one reaction, Zizos says. "We thought it was just a great answer and that GEN McAuliffe was speaking for all Americans."

There is one point, however, Kinnard insists on setting straight: the idea that "Nuts" was selected because McAuliffe's other comments were obscene. "That's absolutely false. Tony McAuliffe was a fine, decent commander, a bona fide gentleman who did not believe in vulgarity."

Today, Bastogne proudly hosts a NUTS museum and NUTS café. And it's hard to find a store in town that doesn't sell NUTS T-shirts, coffee mugs or other items celebrating McAuliffe's defiant response.

Tom McVickers, a battlefield tour director catering specifically to veterans visiting Europe to see where they fought, says Bastogne is almost always on the "must stop and see list."

"If we're in that area, they insist on going there," he said. "Veterans and their families are thrilled to see the museum or restaurant and visit the bust of GEN McAuliffe in the square. It's one of those fascinating legends that ranks right up there with the Normandy beaches."

As for the unprecedented fame and inspirational spirit "Nuts" provided for the citizens of Bastogne and Americans back home, it can't compare with the exhilaration it brought to 101st Abn. soldiers on that bleak and desperate day.

"Nobody had any thoughts of giving up, because we weren't trained to give up," said

The names of restaurants and other businesses in today's Bastogne proudly recall McAuliffe's reply.

Robert Wright, who was a medic with the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment. "We were trained to be successful. So we all agreed that was as good an answer as anybody could come up with, because



Veterans of the 101st Airborne Division gathered in Normandy to celebrate the 55th anniversary of D-Day and the Battle of the Bulge.

that was how everyone felt."

Wright stressed how bitter the weather was, with sub-zero temperatures, the countless injured soldiers and the lack of medical supplies. But failure to come out of the situation successfully was simply unthinkable.

"Nothing kept us from saying: 'We're airborne, and we're the best!' And we were determined to keep showing the enemy we were the best. We didn't give a damn what the Germans wanted, so it was a great answer to a stupid question. And it's a piece of history that's won't die."

Another medic, Allison Blaney of the 326th Medical Battalion, was near the 101st operations room when McAuliffe and his staff made the decision to go with the "nuts" reply. He says it's a priceless memory he's only appreciated more with time.

"It provided the motivation needed to show the Germans just how determined and dedicated we were," he said. "Everybody in the room looked so pleased at the answer. And I don't believe anyone knew or could have guessed the outcome that one word

would have on the world. It was just fantastic!"

Tom Splan was a forward observer with the 377th Parachute Field Artillery, who learned of the "Nuts" reply in the field when the rumors

began circulating about surrender. "I said it's a damn good thing McAuliffe said that, because I wasn't about to give in. And while I didn't fully realize

we were surrounded with such force against us, it didn't matter, because that answer fired everybody up."

Splan fought alongside two other soldiers, and for the rest of the day, he remembers, the three of them laughed and proclaimed what a great way it was to say "go to hell." "It was a standing joke among us, and all day long we had conversations like 'nuts to you' and 'nuts to the weather' and 'nuts to everything else.' And even though so many years have passed, I still think and laugh about it."

Hubert Long was just 17 when he jumped into Normandy on D-Day with the 501st PIR. He was captured three days later and spent the remainder of the war in a POW camp, but heard the famous "Nuts" story after returning home.

"I felt it was very proper and very American," he said. "I laughed a great deal when I heard it, because I felt that was so typical of the American airborne. It made me very proud, and I feel sure it provided the soldiers incentive and strength to complete the task they had before them. We were taught from the beginning, when I went into the airborne, 'kill or be killed.' That's what we believed and that's what we practiced."

Today, Kinnard still believes "Nuts" demonstrates how American soldiers, even when faced with death or capture, find a way to deal with a problem and come out ahead.

"That's a personal trait I take great pride in, to put in a lighthearted touch when something bad comes along. When you do that, you can't help but make yourself and everyone else feel better," he said. "I know that's why I immediately thought 'Nuts' was the best answer we could give. Even after all these years, I still believe it." □

